BYRNES ON TUESDAY

Down under

IN Australia, if a car is pulled up to check tax and insurance, the driver is first breath tested.

No ifs, no buts, but blow!

Even octogenarian reverend mothers in ancient Austin Sevens have to try to get the wind up on demand.

Here in Limerick, over the August bank holiday weekend, gardaí bagged 482 drivers and arrested 17. So 3.5 per cent of those randomly tested proved positive enough to be taken to the nearest main station to be further tested by use of the intoxiliser machine. Before this random testing came in a few weeks ago, a garda had to form the opinion that a person was incapable of driving, either from the manner in which the vehicle was being driven or from the actions or state of the driver when stopped. "A strong smell of alcohol from his breath" would often do.

In reality, the law was a bit vague as to what constituted enough to allow a garda to "form an opinion". And, in any case, most people who failed the intoxiliser, and were charged accordingly, arrived at the local court with their hands up, and took their punishment without any evidence needing to be sworn. As far as I could see, breath testing was already fairly random.

When I first started out in the business, prosecutions for drink driving were rare. To begin with there weren't as many cars on the road, and drivers with drink taken were often coming from race meetings, funerals or other gatherings. In the days when flights at Shannon were often delayed by several hours due to headwinds or mechanical problems, the upstairs bar did a roaring trade through the night as the families of passengers waited and the men chose the top shelf for the occasion that was in it, with no thought for the condition they might be in when they subsequently set off for home.

The chances of being caught were slimmer too. There were fewer garda cars, and anyway the public attitude was far more tolerant to drink driving. A guard who got a name for targeting drink drivers would often be told by his bosses to ease off and to give the publicans, especially those in smaller towns and villages, a chance to make a living.

On top of that, the proofs were different than they are now. Upon being arrested on suspicion, a doctor had to be called to the station, and he would administer a number of tests, such as getting the suspect to pick coins from the floor, to stand on one leg and to walk a straight line. The doctor would subsequently have to attend court and swear as to his observations and then solemnly testify that he had concluded that the defendant had been incapable of having proper control of a mechanically propelled vehicle on the occasion due to the excessive consumption of alcohol.

In those days, every village had a number of pubs, and all depended on their customers driving in from the surrounding countryside. Rural Ireland was far more heavily populated than is now the case, and taxis in those districts were unknown.

Today, some villages have just one pub, or none. Every small town has at least one on-call hackney service. I read that the national consumption of booze is ever increasing, yet even what bars remain are not full, certainly not during the week. So who is consuming all this booze?

A glance at other people's supermarket trolleys will provide part of the answer. The wines and spirit shelves are doing a big trade, and the number of six-packs seem to be up too, so people are drinking and entertaining at home.

But a look at the people who appear before the courts on drink driving charges would seem to indicate that there are two sections of society, both male, which feature most prominently. The first, and most predictable, are young people who had been detected coming from discos and such places. These are of the age group which provides us with the majority of road fatalities. But the other group are middle aged and even elderly men who have not adjusted their lifestyles since the law has progressively been tightened up, and who continue to "take the chance". They deem it unfair that they can no longer drive to the pub and play a few hands of cards over a couple of drinks and drive home, and they resent it when the judge puts them off the road for a year or two. A friend, a man older than myself, feels like that and wonders whether the boy racers can be targeted without depriving the likes of himself of one of the few pleasures left to him. Offhand, I can't imagine how that could be done without having one limit for the under 30s and another for those older, and the legality of doing that would be constitutionally doubtful.

I imagine that we'll just have to start thinking Australian.

The puff-puff

IN September 1884, one Edmond Cooke was appointed traffic inspector to the Limerick and Kerry Railway, which operated from Newcastle West to Tralee, at a salary of £125 per annum.

He was appointed to a similar position with the Rathkeale and Newcastle Junction Railway at the same time, the latter company agreeing to find him a house and pay half the cost of furnishing it and to provide him with two suits of clothing a year.

But the whole line from its junction with the Foynes line at Ballingrane to Newcastle West, and thence all the way to Tralee, was in reality operated under contract by the Waterford and Limerick Railway. And the W&LR didn't appreciate being criticised over the inadequate standard and quantity of its carriages and the regularity of its service, which was exactly what Mr Cooke had been employed to do.

So, two months after his appointment, the W&LR complained that Cooke, presumably resplendent in his new inspector's uniform, had been found smoking in a non-smoking carriage. Not only that, but he had also travelled in uniform in a first class carriage, to the distress of the genteel ladies and gentlemen therein, who felt annoyed at having to share their plush carriage with the hired help in livery. The W&LR threatened to withdraw all of Cooke's facilities.

Relating to the first complaint, Cooke responded by saying that he had merely held an unlit cigar in his hand, although local W&LR staff said that he had smoked both on the platform and in the carriage. On the second matter, Cooke was directed to travel second class while in uniform "and in any class he desired when not so attired".

Whatever motives the W&LR may have had for seeking to discipline the hapless Cooke, I suspect that this may have been one of the earliest actions taken in this country to enforce a smoking ban. Smoking was not perceived to be deleterious in those days, and a man who could afford to smoke cigars, as opposed to sucking a clay *dúdín*, would be seen as being not of the common herd and a cut above the rest. Such people were not usually formally upbraided for their actions, but instead might be quietly taken to one side in the hotel lounge of an evening, where a pallsy-wallsy word in the ear would more than suffice to remedy matters.

Trains had smoking and non-smoking carriages until recent decades, but it slowly began to dawn on railway operators that it was a waste of money to have to haul two heavy carriages where one would suffice, especially on lines where passenger numbers were low.

So the obvious solution was to ban smoking altogether. This was initially achieved by the simple expedient of unscrewing the ashtrays from armrests, table ends and side panels. But some people still smoked and chucked their fag-ends out the windows or else stubbed them out on the vinyl flooring.

But the newer trains were centrally ventilated, and carriages had no opening windows, save in the doors at either end. This led to smokers cluttering the doorways. But now even the doors don't have opening windows. People soon came to realise that they would have to forego the weed for the duration of their journey, and the only place in a train where one might still get a whiff of stale smoke is in the lavatories—hardly the most appealing of surroundings in which to indulge the habit.

The complaint against Edmond Cooke's, 122 years ago, may have had little to do with his smoking and, indeed, the W&LR continued to obstruct his work by not providing him with traffic records and station accounts, so his reports to the two owning companies on the operation of their respective parts of the line were probably tentative at best. Relations were to become even more acrimonious before they got better and, from September 1887, Cook combined his duties as inspector with those of general manager of the Listowel and Ballybunion Railway, the unique system commonly known as the Lartigue monorail, until his retirement as inspector at Newcastle West in January 1901 with a compensation package worth £198.

I was in Listowel last week and was glad to see the replica length of monorail, with its engine and carriages straddling the trestled running track, attracting goodly numbers of tourists. The engine looks similar to the original twin-boilered ones, large forward lamp and all, but is diesel powered. But the passenger accommodation is a faithful reproduction of the original, and the experience is enjoyed by all who visit.

Jimmy Denihan is the chairman of the project and tells me that the Lartigue heritage train is actually paying its way, a rarity among restoration visitor attractions anywhere in the country.

As I watched the "new Lartigue" gleaming in the sunshine, I fancied that I saw the ghost of Edmond Cooke, thumbs in his lapel and puffing on a sturdy cheroot, proudly surveying the reincarnation of the dream which he had first brought to fruition on March 1, 1888.

The stretch of ordinary railway for which he had been traffic inspector, the 50 miles from Ballingrane to Tralee, was finally closed by CIÉ in 1977, and has since been taken up. But as I sauntered Rathkeale's Matrix Way, the newly developed nature walk in the town, it was nice to see that the old railway route, there, as in Ardagh, Newcastle West, Barnagh, Tempeglantine and Abbeyfeale, is still in use as a valuable public facility.

I am grateful to Tom Ferris of Ian Allen Publishing in Leicestershire for providing me with a review copy of a splendid new book, "Waterford, Limerick & Western Railway", by the eminent railway historian, Ernie Shepherd, from which much of this week's column is sourced. The A4 hardback is brilliantly researched and lavishly illustrated and is now on sale at a very modest price of Stg£19.99.

—MARTIN BYRNES